



FAQs

What is the Northeast Regional Planning Body (RPB)?

The Northeast Regional Planning Body (RPB) is responsible for developing the Northeast Ocean Plan as part of President Obama's 2010 Executive Order creating the National Ocean Policy. The National Ocean Policy called for the formation of nine regionally-focused RPBs to better manage the nation's oceans and coasts. The Northeast RPB was the first group to answer the call and was launched in November 2012. The RPB builds off the work of the Northeast Regional Ocean Council which had already been coordinating ocean planning through its state-federal partnership in the Northeast since 2005.

The RPB consists of nine federal agencies with management or regulatory authority over activities in the ocean, six federally recognized tribes, the New England Fishery Management Council, and the six New England states. New York state and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (Canada) serve as Ex-Officio members.

Who makes up the Regional Planning Body?

The RPB includes representatives from:

- All six New England states
- Nine federal agencies: Joint Chiefs of Staff, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of Energy, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Department of Transportation, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- Six federally recognized tribes: Aroostook Band of Micmacs, Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council, Mohegan Indian Tribe of Connecticut, Narragansett Indian Tribe of Rhode Island, and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head
- The New England Fishery Management Council
- Two ex-officio members: New York, Canada

Additionally, the RPB extensively engaged with stakeholders and the public throughout the planning process.

Why do we need to coordinate Ocean Planning?

The ocean is a shared resource, and different ocean areas and activities are managed by different entities. Some waters are managed by states, and some by the federal government. Particular agencies have responsibility for certain uses (e.g., the NE Fishery Management Council for fisheries), and tribes have particular legal rights (e.g., for sustainable fish harvest). Additionally, the ocean has many diverse uses for diverse groups of people; therefore in the absence of a comprehensive law for ocean management, government must work within existing authorities to coordinate across all of these activities.

The Northeast relies on the ocean for basic needs including jobs, food, energy, national security, transportation, and recreation. We need a healthy ocean ecosystem to continue to meet these needs. Ocean Planning allows government agencies and stakeholders to work together to anticipate needs, set priorities, and use a regional perspective when making ocean management decisions. The result is better informed, more efficient, more transparent decisions about the ocean made with more public input.

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With this in mind, the RPB set three goals for this ocean plan: 1) healthy ocean and coastal ecosystems; 2) effective decision-making; 3) compatibility among past, current, and future ocean uses.

What is the purpose of the Draft Northeast Ocean Plan?

The Draft Northeast Ocean Plan is a forward-looking blueprint to advance three goals: achieve healthy ocean and coastal ecosystems; foster effective decision-making; and ensure compatibility among past, current, and future ocean uses. This is a living document and is meant to enable informed decision-making. The ocean is always evolving, and this plan includes actions to better understand a changing ecosystem and use that knowledge to manage human activities in the ocean under existing authorities.

In drafting a Plan to reach these goals, the RPB applied principles such as a transparent and stakeholder-informed approach, basis in science and best available data, and a consensus-based approach to making decisions.

The Northeast Ocean Plan is not just a snapshot picture of the ocean today; it looks at changing patterns and public feedback to create a Plan that can evolve over time to inform emerging issues and capitalize on new opportunities for progress. It is comprehensive and addresses natural resources (marine life and habitats) and human activities; it thus furthers our understanding of this dynamic ecosystem.

The draft provides an opportunity to gather feedback from the public and stakeholders. The open comment period will take place from May 25th - July 25th so that groups and individuals from all sectors can contribute to the final Ocean Plan.

What does the Draft Northeast Ocean Plan include?

While the RPB does not have the authority to change government policy or regulation, the Plan includes actions on how to use plan data to inform and guide the decision-making processes of federal agencies in carrying out their existing mandates. These actions are focused on 10 primary areas: Marine Life and Habitat, Cultural Resources, Marine Transportation, National Security, Commercial and Recreational Fishing, Recreation, Energy and Infrastructure, Aquaculture, Offshore Sand Resources, and Restoration.

Actions in these 10 areas describe how federal agencies will apply information and data developed through the Plan.

A key aspect of the Plan is the Northeast Ocean Data Portal—a decision support and information system for people engaged in ocean planning in the region from the Gulf of Maine to the Long Island Sound. The Portal provides unprecedented access to data, interactive maps, tools, and other information needed for decision making. The Portal can be accessed at: <http://www.northeastoceandata.org/>.

The Plan also describes:

- Responsibilities for maintaining the data portal and updating the plan
- Best practices for agency coordination, and to enhance stakeholder engagement in agency decisions
- Approaches to monitoring plan performance and the health of the ocean
- Science priorities to further improve management of ocean activities and resources

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Who can submit feedback and how?

The RPB is committed to a process based on public and stakeholder engagement. Anyone can submit feedback on this draft Plan, from stakeholders to policymakers to the general public. Feedback can be submitted in person at any of our public meetings across the region. Individuals can send their comments via email to comment@neoceanplanning.org, and/or submit comments through the website. Public comments can also be mailed to:

Betsy Nicholson
North Regional Director, NOAA Office for Coastal Management
55 Great Republic Drive
Gloucester, MA 01930

What is the Northeast Ocean Data Portal?

The Northeast Ocean Data Portal provides unprecedented levels of usable information on the ocean's natural resources and existing (and proposed) human activities. It contains interactive maps, tools, and other important information about the ocean and its resources. This information was developed to inform decision-making in the ocean; each data set was developed through an extensive scientific- and expert-review process for "ground-truthing" and to maximize utility. It contains interactive maps and other important information about the ocean and its resources. Information about marine life, marine traffic, fishing, recreation, aquaculture, and a variety of other topics can be found at <http://www.northeastoceandata.org/>.

What are the next steps?

This is a draft plan. The RPB is urging stakeholders, policymakers, and the general public to submit public comment. After the conclusion of the public comment period on July 25, the RPB will consider these submissions and revise the plan accordingly.

The final draft of the Northeast Ocean Plan then will be submitted to the White House National Ocean Council for review and certification, at which point the plan is in effect.

Will the Draft Northeast Ocean Plan change any laws or regulations?

No. The Northeast RPB does not have the authority to change any laws or regulations.

What ocean activities and resources are addressed by the Draft Northeast Ocean Plan?

Individual sections of the Northeast Ocean Plan address Marine Life and Habitat, Restoration, Cultural Resources, Marine Transportation, National Security, Commercial and Recreational Fishing, Recreation, Energy and Infrastructure, Aquaculture, and Offshore Sand Resources. These sections can be found in Chapter 3.

The Northeast Ocean Plan also offers specific measures for governmental coordination, monitoring of the health of the ocean, and identifies future scientific and research needs. To learn more, the plan can be found on our website.

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What was the process of developing the Draft Northeast Ocean Plan?

The draft of the Plan was developed by the RPB with extensive involvement of regional experts, industry, environmental organizations, and stakeholders over the course of four years. In developing the Plan, the RPB followed five key principles:

- Meaningful public participation
- Sound science
- A comprehensive, ecosystem-based approach
- Transparent, efficient government decision-making
- Adaptive management

Formal RPB meetings were convened roughly every six months, and each meeting allocated time for public feedback and participation. Additionally, the RPB held public workshops focused on upcoming topics leading up to each formal RPB meeting to gather public information. Decisions were made using a consensus-based approach based on public and stakeholder input.

In total, there were seven formal RPB meetings held across five different states between November 2012 and November 2015. In between formal meetings, there was ongoing public and stakeholder outreach to identify and discuss issues, review data, and procure scientific input. Expert work groups, large public forums, electronic and social media, and state-level meetings with specific stakeholder groups were incorporated in the development of the draft.

What regions are covered by the Plan?

The Northeast Ocean Plan covers the New England coast and ocean, from the shoreline out to the extent of US jurisdiction (200 miles offshore) and from the Gulf of Maine south through Long Island Sound. The Plan includes collaboration with Canada and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Planning Body to ensure coordination across borders.

How does the Plan address climate change?

Climate change necessitates a dynamic and comprehensive approach to ocean planning due to its wide-ranging effects on many levels of ocean policy and activity. The Northeast Ocean Plan works to ensure the overall health of the ocean, so it focuses on the specific effects of climate change on different activities—from changes in fish migratory patterns to the impact of sea level rise on sand barges and offshore renewable energy. Furthermore, the Ocean Plan's ecosystem-based management approach allows it to make sure that the oceans and coasts remain climate-resilient without impairing economic development. Guidelines and recommendations to ensure the overall health of oceans in the face of environmental and economic challenges are made throughout the Northeast Ocean Plan.